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Effect Of Herbal Medicines On Pregnancy

in Health | January 15, 2015



Herbal medicines refer to herbs, herbal materials, herbal preparations and finished herbal products used in the treatment of disease conditions and maintenance of health. Herbal medicines like their orthodox counterparts act through some mechanisms to bring about their curative effects in the body. Some of these mechanisms are understood and demonstrated by Pharmacologists in the lab through animal studies and other experiments. The outcome of a drug/medicine study gives an idea as to the side effects/undesirable effects expected in people on the medication.

A medication is withheld and not used (contraindicated) in individuals with certain disease condition and pregnancy if the side effects out ways the desirable effects. More than 50% of pregnant women take prescription or nonprescription (over-the-counter) medicines at some time during pregnancy. In general, drugs should not be used during pregnancy unless absolutely necessary because many can harm the fetus. About 2 to 3% of all birth defects result from drugs taken to treat a disorder or symptom. However medicines sometimes are essential for the health of the pregnant woman and the fetus but the risk and benefits associated with such medicines should be made known to pregnant women by their physicians.

Medicines including herbal medicines taken by pregnant women get to the fetus by crossing the placenta, the same route used by oxygen and nutrients in the mother's blood needed for fetus's growth and development. Medicines that are harmful in pregnancy(especially in the first trimester) act through different ways. For instance, some affect the fetus indirectly by reducing the mother's blood pressure therefore reducing the flow of blood carrying oxygen and nutrients to the placenta. The wood betony plant (*Stachys officinalis*) is an example of BP reducing medicine in pregnancy. Others act by causing the muscles of the uterus to contract forcefully, triggering preterm labour and delivery or indirectly by reducing nutrient and oxygen supply to the fetus.

Again some medicines that are harmful in pregnancy act directly on the fetus, causing damage, abnormal development leading to birth defects, or death whiles others alter the placenta function by causing constriction(narrowing) of blood vessels thus reducing oxygen and nutrient supply . This results in underdeveloped and underweight babies. The wormwood plant(*Artemisia absinthium*) when used during pregnancy may cause uterine contractions, miscarriage, and preterm labour .

Although herbal medicines are natural, not all are safe to use during pregnancy. The Food and Drugs Authority(FDA) urges pregnant women not to take any herbal product without talking to their healthcare providers. Pregnant women are also cautioned to consult a Medical Herbalist(MH), and experienced herbalists registered with the Traditional Medicine Practice Council(TMPC) under the ministry of health Ghana if they want to use any herbal medication during pregnancy. Depending on the source, some information will list an herb as safe to consume during pregnancy, whereas others may list the same herb as unsafe. Therefore it is best to consult with professionals before taking any herb, herbal material, herbal preparation or finished herbal product during pregnancy.

Most women are nervous about the serious side effects of orthodox medications during pregnancy thus they resort to herbal medicines. Such individuals should take note that some herbal medicines also may contain substances or active constituents that can cause miscarriage, premature birth, uterine contractions, or injury to the fetus as discussed earlier. Few studies have been done to measure the effects of various herbs on pregnant women or a developing fetus.

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